Kidepo Valley National Park

Kidepo Valley was first gazetted as a game reserve and upgraded to national park status in 1962. It covers an area of 1,442 km² between 914m and 2,750m above sea level. Located in Uganda’s remote north-east corner, Kidepo is one of East Africa’s last great wildernesses. Though for years Kidepo could only be reached by air, due to poor roads and perennial insecurity in northern Uganda, it is now a single day’s drive from Kampala. The park contains two rivers, Kidepo and Narus that flow only after heavy rain. During the dry months, wildlife is dependent on remnant pools along the Narus.

Uganda’s most isolated park is found in the country’s distant north-eastern corner, close to Kenya and South Sudan in the farthest extremity of the remote, sparsely populated Karamoja region. One of East Africa’s most magnificent wildernesses, the Kidepo landscape is one of tremendous drama with grasslands roamed by big game favourites extending towards rugged mountains in all points of the compass. It is an area of rich cultural interest for the plains around the park are dotted with the manyattas (homesteads) of Karamoja’s fiercely traditional pastoralists.

The park consists of two broad, shallow valleys; Narus and Kidepo. These are drained by seasonal ‘sand rivers’ that fill – and then only briefly – after rainstorms in the Morungule mountains. The Kidepo Valley and its tributaries are completely dry for most of the year while remnant pools persist along the Narus. Historically, these represented important water points for which local clans competed during the dry months (Narus means ‘muddy area’). Today, as the only permanent water within the park, these pools are equally critical for wildlife. As a result, the park’s wildlife, tourism activities and infrastructure are concentrated in the southern part of the Narus Valley around Apoka.

WILDLIFE

Perhaps surprisingly, given the harsh climate, Kidepo’s savanna, bush and forests habitats support a wide diversity of mammals with 86 species. Indeed it is the only Ugandan refuge for number of species, including cheetah, bat-eared fox, striped hyaena and caracal while eland only occurs in Kidepo and Lake Mburu. Though buffalos are far from rare in Uganda, their huge seasonal congregations in the swamps of Kidepo’s Narus Valley cannot fail to impress. Elephant, Rothschild’s giraffe, lion, leopard, spotted hyaena and black backed and side-striped jackal are also present.

Kidepo boasts over 475 bird species, a number second in Uganda only to Queen Elizabeth National Park’s 604 species. The distinctive birdlist includes over 100 ‘dry country’ residents of northern Uganda and Kenya including a number that are endemic to the Kidepo region e.g. rose ringed parakeet, Clapperton’s francolin and Karamoja apalis. Other highlights include the ostrich, secretary bird, kori bustard, red-throated bee-eaters, the Abyssinian roller and the Abyssinian ground hornbill. Kidepo is also notable for 56 raptor species including the rare lappet-faced vulture, lesser kestrel and Denham’s bustard.
LOCAL PEOPLE
Most of the people bordering the park are Karamojong who, though traditionally nomadic pastoralists, are slowly adopting a more settled lifestyle. Interested visitors can visit their manyatts (homesteads) at Kawalakol, Lorukul and Karamoja to learn about their traditional customs and dances. Karamojong stools, knives, spears and jewellery, are perhaps the most sought after crafts in Uganda. Visitors can also visit the Ik, Uganda's most isolated tribe, which lives on the lofty, 2570m Mount Morungule on the Kenya border. Visits to these communities require advanced arrangement.

ACCESS
By Road
A road trip to Kidepo is an exciting adventure with various road conditions via a sound 4WD vehicle is required. Fuel is not available in Kidepo and clean fuel is scarce in Karamoja so plan accordingly. Be aware that road conditions in the area can be difficult. Refer to the Bradt Guide to Uganda and Uganda Maps Sheet 10 (Kidepo) for more information.

The quickest and most popular route from Kampala to Kidepo runs via Gulu and Kitgum (571km). The road is well maintained so a sound 4WD vehicle is required. Fuel is available in Kitgum, at the Karamoja border and at Kakine. The road is well maintained and the journey is about 7 hours. There are also two scenically located campsites in the park at Kidepo and at Nga Moru. Contact Kitgum for more information.

If travelling to Kidepo via Kitgum, do try to return to Kitgum to make an alternate experience of Karamoja. The 626km route via Moroto and Mibale passes through Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve and close to Mount Elgon National Park. Another option (100km) passes via Soroti and Mibale.

By air
Flights from Entebbe to Kajjansi and/or Entebbe international airport.

Charter and scheduled flights fly to Kidepo airstrip from Kajjansi and/or Entebbe international airport.

By Road
The Narus Valley south of Apoka is the park’s prime game viewing area as wildlife congregates here for much of the year. Look for buffaloes in the swamps along the valley floor, giraffe on the drier slopes above and scan the rock outcrops for lions. In addition to the main game circuits at Kakine, Katurum and Nagusokopire, newly created loops to the north west of Apoka and to the south of the seasonal Crocodile Pool have opened up new parts of the valley to exploitation.

Activities & Attractions
NARUS VALLEY GAME DRIVE
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NATURE WALKS
Short nature walks around Apoka Rest Camp provide the chance to view species such as zebras, hartebeest and reedbuck. Longer walks through the open grasslands of East Kakine should provide sightings of giraffe, buffalo, elephant and perhaps distant lions. Visitors can also explore part or all of the 15km Romoro Trail on the southern side of the Narus valley. All walks require a ranger guide.

OUTSIDE THE PARK

Community walks
Community walks provide the opportunity to learn about life in the local Karamojong manyatts (homesteads) at Kawalakol, Lorukul and Karamoja.

TARRIFS & PAYMENT
For information on park entrance and activity fees, please refer to the UWA tariff sheet at www.ugandawildlife.org. Payments can be made using Uganda Shillings, US dollars, British pounds, Euros and Visa. Twenty percent of all park fees are shared with communities in park boundary parishes to share the benefits of ecotourism and generate local support for conservation.

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